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WHY WRITING CENTERS WORK: ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE SOUTH CENTRAL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE, 13 FEBRUARY 2015

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My title contains the first of many generalizations I will issue. I forewarn you that I will be painting with a very broad brush, more like a road roller than a paint roller. That said, I do believe that writing centers do work for the most part, and I take as primary evidence their popularity among those who come to writing centers and the enthusiasm among those who work in writing centers. My experience is confirmed by many surveys that conclude people who visit writing centers are overwhelmingly satisfied. To say that writing centers are usually successful for all involved is not to say that they inevitably succeed; they don't. The demise of the first writing center at the University of Texas at Austin is one counter example, a center brought down by a lack of staff, low visibility, a miniscule budget, and, decisively, by a lack of administrative support. You know the story. Nonetheless, I hope you grant my premise—that while writing centers are not epiphytes, living only on what they can draw from the air, they still can blossom on the thinnest of soils on rocky cliffs.

Which brings me to the question: Why do they work? I'm going to offer two explanations. The first is from the perspective of the development of writing programs in American higher education in the twentieth century. I'm giving only a quick sketch because this ground is familiar. Although rhetoric was taught first in colleges in colonial America and the early national period, the principal mission of those institutions was to train ministers in the orthodoxy of the sponsoring denominations. Courses devoted primarily to writing instruction are a post-Civil War phenomenon, springing up at the same time as the establishment of land-grant universities following the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 and the diversification of the curriculum into the disciplines of the sciences, applied sciences, and social sciences that we know today. The number of colleges continued to grow and the curriculum continued to expand into the first decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1920, writing courses diversified into advanced writing, technical writing, business writing, journalism, and creative writing courses (Berlin 55-56). At this time the forerunners of writing centers also appear. Peter Carino, in a 1995 article in *Writing Center Journal*, observes that as early as 1904 writing courses using the "laboratory method" were based on peer-editing groups and individual consulting from the instructor. Carino traces how these courses evolved into stand-alone writing labs of the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, facing issues similar to those of writing centers today: Whom should they serve? What services should they provide? What form should consulting sessions take?

Following World War II, the dominant trends in American higher education have been the explosive growth of enrollment and the diversity of the new students. Enrollment at degree-granting postsecondary institutions rose from 2.1 million in 1951 to 4.1 million in 1961, 8.9 in 1971, 12.4 in 1981, 14.4 in 1991, 15.9 in 2001, reaching 21 million in 2011 (United States). The more than doubling of students between 1961 and 1971 produced a crisis in American higher education because many were first-generation college students, often lacking not simply preparation for college work but also the ability to adapt to an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile culture. One response to this deluge of students was the creation of writing centers, which seemed to fit hand-and-glove with the spread of basic writing programs. Susan Mendelsohn notes that a number of writing center scholars (for example, Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead) acknowledge a longer history of writing centers but claim that the writing center movement began in the 1970s.

Certainly writing centers proliferated during the 1970s and no doubt the larger institutional and social contexts were favorable to their spread. Certainly the exponential increase in the number of college students was a major contributing factor. But there are also reasons to question the direct linkage between rise of writing centers and the expansion of college writing programs.

First, many writing center professionals do not associate the development of writing centers with college writing programs. The influx of students following World War II brought pressure to offer remedial writing instruction, and as early as 1950,

Robert Moore attempted to distinguish the remedial instruction in "writing clinics" from the voluntary workshops in writing labs. The issue was far from settled by 1984 when Stephen North published his landmark essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center." North starts with this sentence: "This is an essay that began out of frustration" (433). He concludes the first paragraph with these words about his colleagues: "[They] do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center" (433). In 2012, writing center director Alexandria Janney observes in reading North's article, "It was a little disappointing and frustrating to see how much has remained the same since 28 years ago when this article was written."

Second, writing center practices have had strong external influences. Well documented in the issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, begun by Muriel Harris in 1976, are the influences of feminism. For example, Roxanne Cullen in 1992 writes that concepts of "connected learning" and "connected teaching" set out in Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing* "seem appropriate terms for articulating that special learning that occurs at the Writing Center" (2). Less well documented is the influence of the citizenship schools of the Civil Rights Movement. The woman Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as "The Mother of the Movement," Septima Poinsette Clark, was one of the leaders in establishing meeting places in the Deep South where African Americans who had been denied adequate education could learn literacy skills such as filling out forms, writing checks, and ordering by mail (Olson 213-15). Today, many writing centers are not situated in American colleges. They have sprung up in high schools, after school programs, community-based centers, and increasingly around the world where the histories of secondary and higher education differ significantly from those in the United States. Thus, there is no singular writing center movement or trajectory of development.[1]

Moreover, the brief narrative of American higher education I have offered says almost nothing to answer the question I am posing: Why do writing centers work? North considers this question in terms of individual consultations in "The Idea of a Writing Center" when he argues that the job of the writing centers is "to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). I will examine North's argument shortly, but it's equally important to interrogate the idea of a center—a group of people working together with certain shared assumptions. I would like to widen the scope and history far beyond the eighty or so years that stand-alone writing labs and writing centers have existed. I'm going to do what used to be known as a Carl Sagan move but today is probably known as a Neal deGrasse Tyson move—in other words, billions and billions.

Actually just seven or so million years. That's when our primate ancestors divided from chimpanzees. For most of those millions of years, our ancestors shared space with other closely related species. Around 200,000 years ago the first anatomically modern humans appeared from which all 7.3 billion of us on the planet today descended. The eruption of a volcano in modern Indonesia between 77,000 and 69,000 years ago caused a climate catastrophe that reduced humans to critically endangered status between 1,000 and 10,000 breeding pairs, but the population bounced back and spread quickly into Europe and across Asia, reaching Australia no later than 46,000 years ago. Humans moved up the Danube about 40,000 years ago, encountering their larger cousins, the Neanderthals. By 30,000 years ago the Neanderthals were gone. When the last ice age ended around 11,000 years ago and the Neolithic revolution saw the beginnings of agriculture and settlement, *Homo sapiens* were alone in an evolutionary sense (Gamble, Gowlett, and Dunbar 12).

The different evolutionary paths are evident today in the physical contrasts between humans and the other great primates, which evolved powerful jaw muscles that allowed them to chew up leaves and other vegetable matter. Humans meanwhile developed much larger brains, but brain tissue requires over 20 times as much energy to run as the equivalent in muscle tissue (Navarette, van Schaik, and Isler). So what was the evolutionary advantage?

This question has been the focus of a great deal of recent research across several disciplines including palaeoanthropology, cognitive archaeology, and evolutionary psychology, much of it funded by the British Academy. In 1992, Robin Dunbar, a professor of anthropology and evolutionary psychology at Oxford, confirmed what was long suspected—that brain size or more precisely the neocortex size is strongly correlated to group size in primates. Primates are highly social, maintaining their personal contact with other members of their group typically by grooming. When a group exceeds its species limit, it fractures. For humans at some point in their evolutionary history, physical forms of grooming were replaced by speech and the exchange of social information. Speech has several advantages over physical grooming. It can be done while being engaged in other activities such as eating. It can involve multiple people at one time. And it allows people to

find out about events they did not witness and thus form judgments about others.

Dunbar's equation predicts that the size of a human social network is limited to about 150 individuals—known as Dunbar's number—which has become popularized in books and periodicals. At first glance, this number appears absurdly low; after all, the majority of humans now live in cities. Of course we can be acquainted with far more than 150 people. The upper limit is based on long-term memory, with the maximum ability to connect names with faces at around 1,500 to 2,000. But Dunbar is interested in the maximum number of people who can maintain stable social relationships, in other words, how many people you can keep tabs on at any one time. Studies have supported Dunbar's number in various contemporary settings, including social media (e.g. Gonçalves, Perra, and Vespitnani). Indeed, the number is typically much smaller than 150; the maximum number of good friends is more like 50 (Gamble, Gowlett, and Dunbar 52).

Social networks require an enormous amount of cognitive energy to maintain because individuals have to infer what the other individuals in the group are thinking and adjust their behavior to accommodate the interests of others as well as to advance their own interests. This process, called *mentalizing*, depends on the volume of specific regions of the neocortex. This research provides insights about how all humans lived as hunter-foragers in times before agriculture and settlement. DNA and archaeological research indicate that humans in the period between 200,000 and 11,000 years ago lived in groups of about 30 to 45 individuals. There weren't anthropologists around to observe them, but we do have accounts of hunter-foragers in modern times that present a remarkably consistent picture. Hunter-foragers were for the most part egalitarian, which is notable from an evolutionary perspective because chimpanzees, our closest relatives, are anything but egalitarian, with groups dominated by alpha males (Boehm). Hunter-foragers did not have chiefs or leaders as such. Decisions were made and disputes settled by the group. Two causes account for this egalitarianism. First, hunter-foragers needed to move frequently to find food, hence they couldn't accumulate much property. Second, they needed work by coalition to avoid creating dominance hierarchies that would threaten the cohesion of the group. Hunter-foragers fostered norms that promoted the values of sharing and generosity. The only person who had a limited leadership role was an elder who guided the band on where to go to find food.

Reading about hunter-foragers reminded me of my time as a writing center director. My role was principally that of the elder who was charged with finding the food. The initiatives that the writing center undertook were ones that grew from the group, such as creating an online writing resource. We had training sessions, but the real leadership came from the staff and experienced consultants who demonstrated the values of the writing center through their constant dedication and enthusiasm. The people who worked in the writing center established behavioral norms. Many writing teachers have similar values, but writing centers possess the advantage of having these values expressed as a group.

Over a century ago the pioneering French sociologist Émile Durkheim recognized the social value of coming together to share an experience, which he called *effervescence*. Communal participation amplifies the intensity and enjoyment of a wide range of activities from playing and watching sports to singing in a choir to laughing in a comedy club. Jane McGonigal makes a similar proposal in *Reality is Broken* when she contends that the appeal of online multiplayer games is based on intrinsic rewards. She claims that humans crave satisfying work, the experience of being good at something, the building of bonds, and the chance to be part of something larger than ourselves. According to McGonigal, online multiplayer games deliver these rewards. I would argue that writing centers provide all of these rewards to the people who work in them, plus the added satisfaction of gaining knowledge and doing something socially useful.

But what about people who come to the writing center? They may benefit from the writing center ethos, but most don't enter the community beyond the short time of the consulting session. What is it, then, that makes a consulting session work? Stephen North explores this question in "The Idea of a Writing Center." He writes,

> We always want the writer to tell us about the rhetorical context—what the purpose of the writing is, who its audience is, how the writer hopes to present herself. We want to know about other constraints—deadlines, earlier experiences with the same audience or genre, research completed or not completed, and so on. (443)

North comes to the conclusion that the essence of the writing center method is talking, no matter what kind of writing is brought to the center.

From what can be externally observed, I agree with North. The question is what is going on that cannot be externally observed in the big neocortex of the writing center consultant. Humans have not only

the ability to use language but also the ability to infer mental states of another people and their intentions. Think for a moment about sarcasm. Something—the tone of voice, a facial expression, or the outrageousness of a statement in a particular context—tips us off that speakers might mean the opposite of what they seem to say. By five years old children have the ability to recognize that people have minds of their own, what psychologists call "theory of mind." This ability continues to develop as people grow to adulthood. The majority of adults can manage five levels of what philosophers refer to *intentionality* (Dennett). The following statement gives a quick example of five-level intentionality with each verb indicating a level: "I *wonder* whether you *suppose* that I *intend* that you *think* that I *believe* X" (Gamble, Gowlett, and Dunbar 52). Some people can cope with even higher levels of intentionality, and I suspect that many of them work in writing centers.

A consultant engages in this kind of complex mental gymnastics in a writing center session. Typically when a person enters a writing center, he or she is asked to check in and is met by a consultant who greets the person. After a few preliminaries such as checking on previous visits and explaining procedures, the consultant invites the writer to present the task that she or he has brought to the center, for example, a personal statement for a law school application. Personal statements are not part of the curriculum, so the writer has few resources for help besides the writing center. The consultant might begin by asking the writer about specific goals for the session besides gaining admission to law school. When the writer and the consultant read the statement together, the consultant's neocortex must shift into high gear. The consultant has to analyze the persona created in the writer's text, imagine the faceless readers of the personal statement and their likely expectations in terms of the writer's goals, the conventions of the genre, the ability to write well, and, furthermore, how these match up or fail to match up. Simultaneously the consultant has to formulate what she or he will subsequently discuss with the writer. When the discussion begins, the consultant has to keep all of these trains of thought active while talking about the writer's draft statement and respond to what the writer has to say. To succeed the consultant must expand how the writer imagines the task at hand. It's hard work and it tires you out. (It also burns up a lot of calories, which is one reason writing centers often have snacks readily available.)

Part of the problem behind North's assertion that our colleagues don't understand what we do in writing centers is that we don't have adequate language to explain what goes on in a writing center. What I have just described cannot be summed up as higher-order concerns or the rhetorical context. The consultant is directly intervening in the writer's thinking. The consultant, as North observed, is changing the writer, not the writing.

But, in turn, the writing may be changing us. If, in fact, the modern writing center movement dates from the 1970s, I would argue that it came in response to fundamental changes in the United States economy. The shift from an economy that was based on manufacturing and creating goods to one based on services, trade, and finance brought increased demands for advanced literacy. Producing ideas moved to the center of the economy, and those ideas are transmitted mostly through writing.

We may have entered at least a new stage if not a new era in writing centers with the dominance of digital media. Now anyone with access to the Internet can create and publish digital content in a variety of media, calling into question very name *writing center* and leading some to argue for *multiliteracy centers* (Mendelsohn; Sheridan; Trimbur). In one sense the possibilities offered by digital technologies seem endless; in another they do not. Humans are highly adaptable. They can thrive in many different kinds of social organizations. By the time of the end of the last ice age, they had occupied nearly every habitable region of the planet with the exception of a few islands. Clearly the big human neocortex gave advantages beyond those of being able to live in cohesive groups. Our behaviors and diets have evolved along with our technologies. Nevertheless, we *Homo sapiens* are still by and large the same genetic creatures who have been around for a very long time. Dunbar's number points us to the crux of our problem. Digital technologies have the potential to put us in contact with thousands of other people, but we lack the capacity to carry on interactive relationships with, at most, a few more above Dunbar's number of 150.

The limitations of Dunbar's number are critical for inexperienced school writers who imagine their audiences as only their teachers. To succeed beyond college, they will have to write for a great diversity of people who often have conflicting as well as shared interests. For writers who come to the writing center with tasks that they typically find unfamiliar and complex, the experience of having someone address their writing with genuine concern is invaluable. They have for a brief time entered the security of the group and benefitted from the knowledge of the group. The key for writing centers moving forward is how to amplify this experience. I see daily examples of

students working in groups in campus coffee shops. My assumption is that many are self-organized. Writing centers can tap this energy, fostering groups that take advantage of the increasing diversity of the college population to give writers a concrete sense of the audiences they will engage.

We humans bring our Stone Age brains to employ the technologies of the digital era. In spite of our mental limitations, we still possess extraordinary abilities, ones that may, if we are lucky, take us beyond the threats of environmental catastrophes on our immediate horizon. We as a species have an extraordinary knack for coming up with ad hoc solutions to the problems that confront us. There's a simple answer to the question "Why do writing centers work?" It's because we're human.

Notes

[1] We in Western nations tend to associate literacy with formal schooling, even if it is home schooling. Mass literacy, however, is not necessarily connected with mass education. For example, the literacy rate in ancient Rome was likely far higher that previously estimated. Tom Standage contends that the Romans created forerunners of social media with elaborate systems of distributing information by papyrus rolls and wax tablets. While few of these everyday artifacts remain, the graffiti-covered walls of Pompeii frozen in time by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE suggest that literacy extended far down the social ladder. Early historians were not much interested in the graffiti, but more recent scholars have appreciated the value of the political slogans, the advertisements, the witticisms, the sexual boasts, and the vulgar, such as "Secundus defecated here," and what they tell us about the daily lives of ordinary Romans (40).

A modern example of literacy occurring outside of schooling was studied by psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole in the 1970s among the Vai, an ethnic group in northwestern Liberia. In the early nineteenth century, tribal elders developed an indigenous syllabic writing system for their language that was taught along with other traditional knowledge by women for girls and by men for boys. Literacy taught in the schools was restricted to English and Arabic. The point I am making with these examples is that individualized writing instruction has and can occur outside of formal schooling.

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